DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 031 468 TE 001 129

By-Larson, Richard L.

Training New Teachers of Composition in Administering Theme Assignments.

Pub Date 68

Note-6p.

Available from-Department of English, Colorado State Univ., Fort Collins, Colorado 80521 (Subscription rates: 1 year, $3.00; $1.00 a copy)

Journal Cit-Journal of English Teaching Techniques; v1 n3 p1-5 Fall 1968

EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC Not Available from EDRS.

Descriptors-*Assignments, *Composition (Literary), Critical Thinking, *English Instruction, Motivation Techniques, Student Evaluation, Student Motivation, *Teaching Techniques, Writing

A teacher's careful planning and administering of writing assignments can help stimulate the student's desire to write well. In planning assignments, teachers should have an overall view of the structure of the course, know what can reasonably be expected of the students, find topics close to the students' interests and experiences, encourage independent observation and thinking, and analyze the demands made by a proposed assignment. Instructions to students should specifically define the subject of the paper and its scope, specify an audience for the students to address, contain precise verbs, and be double-checked for clarity, precision, and economy. When presenting the assignment, the instructor should identify for students the major problems they will face in writing the assignment, allow time for class discussion of the assignment and ways of approaching it, and tell the students which features of their work will be evaluated. (SW)

ED031468

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

JETT

Vol. 1 No. 3

FALL 1968

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL BY MICROFICHE ONLY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY author and JETT TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE U. S. OFFICE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER."

TE 001 129

JOURNAL OF ENGLISH TEACHING TECHNIQUES

EDITORS
Paul Bryant
Bonnie Titley

EDITORIAL BOARD
Richard Anderson, Colorado State University
Donald Carline, University of Colorado
M. F. Heiser, Colorado State University
Edith Wylder, Bemidji State College

THE JOURNAL OF ENGLISH TEACHING TECHNIQUES IS PUBLISHED QUARTERLY, WITH EDITORIAL OFFICES IN THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH, COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY, FORT COLLINS, COLORADO, 80521.

Training New Teachers Of Composition In Administering Theme Assignments

Richard L. Larson University of Hawaii

In an article in the October, 1966, issue of *College Composition and Communication,* I argued for a program to train teachers of composition in writing thorough, constructive comments on their students' themes instead (or in addition to) the usual programs for achieving uniformity in the evaluation of themes. Yet, however constructive, forward-looking, and potentially valuable the instructor's suggestions about a theme, they apply to a piece of work the student has already completed. Equally important and perhaps more important in every instructor's teaching are the assignments he devises - including his written or oral instructions, which must explain to the student his task and stimulate the student's desire to write well. But, as *Freedom and Discipline in English* reminded us, writing assignments are often given hastily, without due thought to the values a given assignment may have or to the problems it may present to the student. These poorly planned and hastily administered assignments are often more to blame for the fuzzy, confused writing we get than the ineptitude and laziness of our students. Our programs for training teachers of composition ought, therefore, to give more attention than many of them now do to helping prospective teachers learn how to plan and administer theme assignments.

It is difficult or impossible, of course, to generalize about the kinds of assignments that will engage students' interest, make them want to write well, and help them to produce an effective paper. Yet I think we can encourage new teachers to plan assignments thoroughly, examine the demands they make on students carefully, and draft the instructions to students precisely, in the hope that such encouragement will reduce the number of ill-advised assignments they give their students. Listed below, with brief comments, are suggestions given to new instructors at the University of Hawaii about the planning of their assignments. The same suggestions might equally well be given to new teachers in secondary schools and junior colleges.

DETERMINING THE ASSIGNMENT

1. Before planning any individual assignments in detail, have in mind an overall structure or strategy for your course. (New instructors may find the shape of the course they teach outlined in a syllabus, but often even new instructors have considerable freedom in the planning of their programs.) Often it is impractical, even if it is possible, to map out in detail the successive steps your course will include; the pace at which your students learn may permit acceleration or force decel-

eration of the program you want to follow, and your program should be flexible enough to accommodate these changes of pace. But you can at least decide what goals you would like your students to have reached by the end of your course, and form some plans for getting them to those goals.

2. *Before planning each assignment, reflect carefully on the progress students have made in your course, and estimate what can reasonably be expected of them.* Recognize what the students have learned to do reasonably well, and what they have not yet practiced or mastered.

3. *Try to find a subject for the assignment that is near enough to the interests and experiences of your students to make them willing to take the time needed for producing a good paper.* An assignment to summarize the thesis and supporting arguments in an abstruce essay on philosophy or politics - however interesting the subject may be to the instructor - may not evoke good writing from students if they have not yet come to feel that the issues treated in the essay are live ones for them. Assignments that demand sensitivity and sophistication in the handling of abstract terms (e.g., "religion," "progressivism," "style") will probably not work well before the student has encountered the dangers of excessive abstraction, the difficulties of working with abstract terms, and the techniques used by experienced writers in controlling such terms. Nor will assignments to argue on such questions as "the treatment of dissenters in our society," despite their apparent interest for students, generate much good work until the students have learned a few of the techniques for effective argument, including how to define specific issues, evaluate evidence, and support predictions about the probable success or failure of particular actions. Although you may want to stretch your students' minds and encourage them to confront new problems, a subject that appears remote and abstract to students will not usually evoke good writing.

4. *Try to be sure that the assignment you are considering will give students the opportunity for independent observation and thinking, will demand more than a perfunctory response, and will encourage diversity in approaches.* Most assignments should require the student to look carefully at the subject, to decide on the point of view he will take toward it, and to select appropriate data for presentation. Most assignments should not permit students to answer a question with a cursorily explained "yes" or "no"; they should usually require formulation of a thesis and careful presentation of well chosen supporting data. Subjects that require the exercise of judgment (such as whether a seemingly neutral report of a crime or riot is in fact biased) or the interpretation of data (such as the results of opinion polls taken some months apart) or subjects that challenge or provoke the student (such as the thesis that "Patriotism is the virtue of the vicious"), are likely, if they are within the students' interests, to evoke more interesting papers than assignments that invite obvious comparisons and routine definitions. Even assignments in narration and description should require the student to select material carefully and arrange it judiciously.

5. *While you are considering what seems to be an appropriate and challenging assignment, try to discover what tasks it will require students to perform in analyzing*

data, reasoning out a conclusion, and arranging their ideas. Every assignment makes different kinds of demands on students; the instructor must understand fully, before making a particular assignment, what demands that assignment will make. Such understanding will not only help him to a decision on whether to use the assignment, but may also show him what he must teach in connection with it. One useful way of coming to understand the assignment better - and of getting a presumably good response to it that can later be distributed to the class for discussion - is to write the assignment yourself. If you cannot do in a reasonable time the job you are giving your students, they probably cannot handle it in a reasonable time, either.

6. After analyzing the demands made by a proposed assignment, ask yourself: can the students do this particular assignment? Do they know enough or have access to enough information to complete the assignment well? Do they have enough understanding of logical and rhetorical techniques to solve the problems that the assignment will pose? If not, decide whether you can teach them, before they write, what they need to know but do not already know. If you can not, the assignment is probably unwise.

7. Imagine for yourself what characteristics a successful treatment of the assignment will have (recognizing, of course, where successful treatments may vary because of different approaches to the subject). Then you can be sure to specify, wherever the task doesn't make it obvious, what the student must accomplish.

DRAFTING INSTRUCTIONS FOR STUDENTS

1. In drafting instructions for the student (whether you are going to duplicate them or give them orally), be sure to define carefully the subject of the paper and its scope: make clear how far students should go (or may go) in exploring the subject. For example, is the student expected or encouraged to consult a minimum number of source materials, is he to base his work on one or two books or essays, is he to rely on observation of events at first hand, etc., or is he allowed to use a combination of sources?

2. Where possible, specify in your instructions an audience for the students to address and a purpose or occasion (or both) for writing. The audiences stipulated should probably be persons the students know or could reasonably find out about - their classmates, students in other classes in the same course, members of a particular club or student group, the entire student body of the school, members of the school's administrative staff, the editors of a local newspaper, members of a specific community group, the entire body of citizens in the community, the audience of a periodical with general circulation, to name a few examples. Or if you prefer not to stipulate an audience and purpose for the students, encourage them to keep an audience and purpose in mind, and to be sure that their work makes clear whom they are addressing, and why. (The prospective audience should probably comprise two or more persons, so that students will not have to speculate on the idiosyncrasies of a single reader.) Students should understand that their writing will succeed or fail depending on how well it accomplishes its purpose with the audience

for whom it was intended, and that you will judge each paper from the position of the student's imagined audience, not simply according to your personal likes and dislikes.

3. In writing your instructions, choose the directive verbs with great care. Use relatively precise verbs like "compare," or explain how," or "argue," or "propose and defend a thesis," rather than less precise verbs like "discuss" (one of the most ambiguous directives one can use) or "deal with." The verbs you use in giving directions tell the student what his task is, and he is entitled to know his responsibilities explicitly.

4. Since learning to write is learning to make decisions about diction, sentence structure, tone, and so on — as well as about selecting and organizing materials — keep to a minimum the number of injunctions about varying sentences, using active verbs, avoiding the passive voice, and so on, unless the assignment is intended deliberately to teach some principle or technique for constructing sentences (e.g., the use of Christensen's "cumulative sentence").

5. Before issuing your instructions (in particular your written instructions), put them aside for awhile if you can, then double check them for clarity, precision, and economy. Ask yourself honestly whether your students will be able, from these instructions, to determine exactly what they must do, and what choices are open to them. Invite one of your colleagues to read over the assignment and point out questions that come to his mind. Eliminate any language that is unnecessarily ambiguous; check the directive verbs with special care. Watch out for amorphous directions and errors in predication that sometimes creep in when an instructor is not completely sure what he is asking for. (On an assignment in the interpretation of a poem, one instructor told his students: "After having delved into the processes of linguistic change and the function of vocabulary, you are now to engage in a first-hand critical study of the English language.") And guard against instructions that unwittingly commit you to untenable generalizations about composition such as those built into the following advice: "This assignment should give you [if you are so inclined] an opportunity to employ figurative language, for figurative language is where words become most powerful . . . . Here, words become concrete." Try to be sure that no student can legitimately ask, while carrying out an assignment, "What does he (i.e., *you*) want?" Revise your directions for maximum clarity and economy before distributing them, just as you expect students to do with their themes.

ADMINISTERING THE ASSIGNMENT

1. Even if you do not include such comments in your written instructions, take time to identify for students the major problems they will face in writing the assignment and, where possible, make suggestions about how students can solve these problems. This procedure may be unnecessary in end-of-term review assignments, but if a writing assignment is to teach - to leave the

student with greater knowledge of a subject and/or greater power to analyze an issue, to organize a paper, and to express ideas than he had before he wrote it - the student should know what he will have to practice and learn from the assignment.

2. *Allow discussion of the assignment before students write.* Let them ask whatever questions they want to about it, to clear up any uncertainties they may have about its purpose and its demands. Invite questions not only when you distribute the assignment, but also at later class meetings before the assignment is due. A class of 25 or 30 students can usually be counted on to find some uncertainty even in instructions you have labored over for some time, especially after the students have begun work on the assignment.

3. *Where possible, give the students a chance to discuss ways of approaching the assignment.* Invite them to propose in class ways of finding and interpreting material, foci of direct observation and description, methods of analyzing issues and carrying on inquiry that might lead to useful ideas, ways of reasoning from data to conclusions, possible plans for organizing ideas, and so on. Devote a class or two to "prewriting" activities, especially exercises in "inventing" material and in detecting what is important in available data. Such classes may make the difference between a set of routine, repetitive papers and a set of fresh, perceptive, varied explorations of your subject.

4. *If you are going to assign a grade to the specific paper (as distinguished from simply making comments on the paper and leaving the assignment of a grade until the end of the course), you may want to tell your students specifically on what features of their work they will be judged.* Such explanations are especially desirable if you plan to focus on only one or two important features in students' papers.

These suggestions obviously reflect a particular way of looking at the teaching of composition: the belief that writing can be taught, that the successive writing assignments are the principal means of teaching it, that a teacher affects a student's performance in writing by the kind of assignment given and by the way it is presented, that it is desirable to direct the student rather carefully instead of letting him pick whatever subject he wishes and treat it however he chooses, and that the making of assignments requires considerable thought and planning. It further assumes that the planning of assignments is as important to an instructor's success as what takes place in his classroom, and maybe more important. Even if instructors at the University of Hawaii, when they leave, prefer to give less tightly structured assignments, we think they profit from being asked to develop assignments in the systematic fashion outlined above. They learn to evaluate their writing assignments before giving them to students. And they see the connection between the pains they take in presenting assignments and the success their students enjoy in completing them.